

History of Design : Asian Design Contribution Handout

Timeline:

1900s - PRESENT

Countries we will be focusing on:

India (South Asia), China (East Asia), Japan (East Asia), Southeast Asia, Singapore (SEA)

Our definition of Asian Design Contribution:

Any significant art which contributes to new ways of thinking about both art and society.

INDIA:

~1947: British Empire Colonialism

Western art influence became established in India because of the British empire's colonialism of India. They established schools of art that leaned towards European art styles in major cities, and one such is the Bombay Art Society. Company style paintings, which are essentially Indo-European paintings done by Indian artists from the East India Company, became common. They usually have a romanticized style, with watercolour being the primary medium for these art pieces. They also convey soft textures and tones, and has a fusion of Indian traditions with European styles.

One of the greatest painters of the Euro-Indian style is Raja Ravi Varma. He was the first Indian to use Western techniques of perspective and composition, adapting them to Indian subjects, styles and themes. His paintings are full of volume and chiaroscuro, similar to European paintings such as Mona Lisa.



1905: Swadeshi Movement

However, the Indians were not happy to be colonized by the British. Hence in 1905, the Swadeshi movement, an Indian Nationalist movement, rose. Indian artists attempted to resuscitate cultural identities suppressed by the British, and rejected Romanticized style of the Company paintings and the mannered work of Raja Ravi Varma and his followers.

Soon, the Bengal School of Art was created, prioritizing reworked Asian Styles with an emphasis for Indian nationalism.

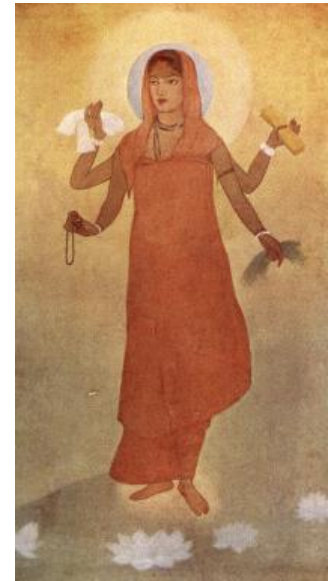
Examples:

“Bharat Mata” by Abanindranath Tagore, Father of Modern Indian Art.

Bharat Mata is portrayed as having four hands, carrying important elements in each of her hand. The painting reflects Indian tradition, which features in most of his works.

“The woman as the Nation”, a very revolutionary depiction which was mainly conceived keeping in mind the Swadeshi movement and the patriotic fervor of that time.

This image became the face of new Swadeshi India, the free and the Independent India, in which the Bharat Mata, the motherland was not in chains or shackles but radiant and promising a bright future to its people.



“Bride’s Toilet” by Amrita Sher-Gil, known for implementing avant-garde western styles into Indian Art.

Bride's Toilet along with paintings done in this period was inspired by the classical tradition of the Ajanta murals. Amrita Sher-Gil painted the image with a large group of figures and used a richly diverse palette to delineate them. The combination of this colour palette and art style has a closer take to traditional Indian art style compared to Raja’s.



“Krishna and Balarama” by Jamini Roy, known for folk tradition art.

Roy has used the earthy colours and stylised shapes of Indian folk art, and the vibrant colours used is also a step up into modern times.



1947: Independence

In 1947, India finally gained their Independence. Indian nationalist movements grew, and artists contributed visually to the struggle for independence.

The naturalistic paintings of Raja Ravi Varma lost popularity- Once hailed for bringing Indian

History and Hindu Mythology vividly to life, his paintings are now criticized for European classicism. Artists now attempt to develop a uniquely Indian Modern Art that differs from European styles of painting India's traditional court, religious, and folk arts leads many to turn to the past for inspiration.

Art Schools that were inspired

There are multiple Art Schools that rose and amended its art focus because of India's newly gained independence.

Calcutta Art School (Bengal): Replaces its collection of European art with examples of indigenous traditions.

Art dept. at Santiniketan (West Bengal): European modernism and Japanese aesthetics were combined to develop a new Indian art. Artists and cultural leaders from India and Japan essentially attempted to forge a pan-Asian aesthetic.

Bengal School of painting: Turns for inspiration to older Indian art forms such as Mughal miniatures and the ancient paintings at the Ajanta caves.

They tend to emphasize line and colour over volume and chiaroscuro.

E.g. *New Clouds*, 1937 by Nandalal Bose



Contemporary Art in India today (1900s - PRESENT)

South Asian artists continue to respond creatively to developments in European art while attempting to make work that is rooted in Indian aesthetics and experiences. The Bombay Progressive Artists' Group established new ways of expressing India in post-colonial era. This was profoundly influential in changing the idiom of Indian Art.

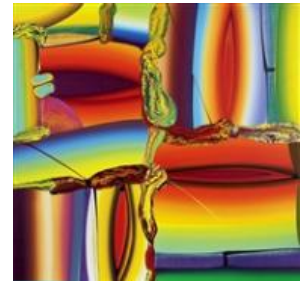
Artists were also inspired by Matisse, Picasso, Cubism, and abstraction to everyday life, religious symbolism, and traditional Indian painting. Figuration remains popular in South

Done by: En Cui, Samantha, Vania, Joey (Chan Ker En)

Asia; this is in contrast to the West. As a result, there is an increase in discourse about Indian Art, in English as well as vernacular Indian languages, changed the way art was perceived in the art schools.

Renowned Contemporary Artists in India

Bose Krishnamachari: (Stretched Bodies Series) Emphasized on the mix of colours which are painted very vibrantly against each other. He uses a sequence of giant, psychedelic acrylics, explosions of saturated colour that retain just enough structure to suggest a confused and artificial interior space. This is very different from the mainstream Indian Art of the past.



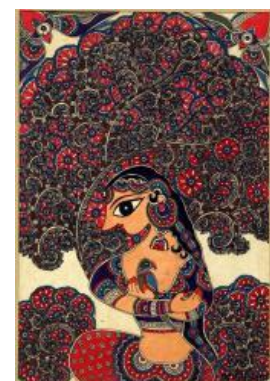
Bikash Bhattacharya: Brings realism into his art pieces, forms that are consist in terms of tone rather than line. He carefully expresses the textural effects of crayons, pastels and pencil using the combination of highlights and depths of passages built of varying intensities of line. Improbable characters (both psychologically and physiologically) play a role on the canvas and dominate his oils. Yet his work is a powerful combination of realism and fantasy, where reality sets the ball rolling and fantasy helps the canvas assume a new reality. This approach to art changed the way art was perceived and made for- it was no longer merely for aesthetics.



Ismail Gulgee: After 1960, he adopted an abstract idiom that combines aspects of Islamic Calligraphy with an abstract expressionist (or gestural abstractionist) sensibility.



Bharti Dayal: She does traditional Mithila painting in most contemporary way, created her own style through the exercises of her own imagination, appearing fresh and unusual.



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Modern Indian Art in General

Artworks of this era has a very traditional indian quality of them, while being balanced by modern art styles. Traditional media like stone and metal were subjected to new treatments and unusual combinations, and inventive techniques like site-specific installations and kinetic sculpture gained popularity. In addition, boundaries between traditional disciplines like painting and sculpture were dissolved, with artists like Sudarshan Shetty, Anandajit Ray, Jagannath Panda and G.R. Iranna hybridizing the two through their practices.

In Summary

Discourse on contemporary Indian art focused on dichotomies of past and present, tradition and modernity, India and the West. More South Asian artists live and create art abroad.

Postmodern hybridity encourages artists to juxtapose diverse sources, often playfully, and with a sense of easy, global proprietorship. This brings together local techniques and materials with global modes within the same artwork.

Politically, most of South Asia's artists in the twentieth century are secular nationalists, striving for images that will bind, not divide, their nations, particularly in the face of continued communal tension.

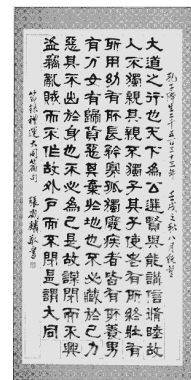
CHINA:

Early 1900s

Still highly traditional, at this time the most prevalent ideology was Confucianism. A lot of artworks such as calligraphy, whiteware ceramics, and pottery were about Confucius and/or his teachings. Some depicted famous Confucian figures like poets and painters, while some portrayed a narrative of Confucius's life.

The art style was still highly traditional; ink was still preferred as a media, and the paintings were more natural, following the idea that human is a part of nature. The lines were more organic and there was rarely a straight, sharp line. Besides the Confucius-related art, the other artworks depicted nature - landscape, birds, flowers.

In addition, there was also scholar's rock or *gongshi* - a stone that had been weathered down to the point of resembling nature, like landscape. Besides being the subject of Chinese paintings, scholar's rocks were also displayed as a part of landscape design.



Mid-1910s and 1920s

At this period of time, Confucianism was blamed for the failure of Chinese Republic, which was founded in 1912. Confucianism promoted traditional art and culture of China, with a belief that China is a culturally unique country. A lot of scholars led a revolt against Confucianism, and proposed a new Chinese culture based on global and Western standards which dealt mainly with European science and democracy - in a way, they wanted to reshape China as a nation among nations.

Every art related to Confucianism was critiqued. Even the use of calligraphy was being critiqued to a certain extent.

It is loosely believed that this movement was the revolutionary break that led to the creation of People's Republic of China; however, the idea is still highly arguable even until now.

1920s

Eventually, a new way of thinking emerged: New Confucianism, which absorbed the Western learning to seek a way to modernize Chinese culture based on traditional Confucianism. In hindsight, it promotes the culture of industrial civilization rather than just traditional personal senses.

The movement is often associated with an essay: "A Manifesto on Chinese Culture to the World", also referred to as the "New Confucian Manifesto". It was published in 1958 by Tang Junyi, Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan and Zhang Junmai. In the Manifesto, the authors argue that while China has to learn modernism from the West, the West has to learn from China as well.



1950s

China transitioned into Socialism. Idealism ran high in the country due to the charisma of Chairman Mao Zedong. In order to spread the doctrine, artists were encouraged to make art for the people. Art and literature gained a fixed position as a platform of propaganda. This is called the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

Social realism, which is an art style the Chinese learnt from the Soviet, became prevalent. Mao Zedong encouraged artworks that depicted revolutionary heroes (workers, soldiers, peasants) or people going through hard times, which meant Chinese artists had to leave their traditional style of drawing nature. Oil painting was also preferred rather than traditional ink painting. Artists lost the ability to self-express, since there were a lot of guidelines they had to follow in order to create something, from the media to the size of painting. Large paintings were only reserved for celebrities, such as state leaders.

Only a few artworks from this period of time survived.

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Today

Some Chinese artists choose to explore the social realist style; some choose to explore the traditional Chinese style. Either way, both of them have a certain amount of Western influence in them; it is not uncommon to see a Western-style art infused with some Chinese elements of nature, such as waves, mountains, or flowers.

Emerging from a century of turmoil, China has a lot of artistic potential - a vast cultural heritage, ancient ethics, religions such as Taoist and Confucianism, language - and China is fundamentally unique, since from the beginning the art is more sensitive towards the nature, contrary to the West which often represent intellectualism and rationalism.

Some Contemporary Chinese Artists

Liu Xiaodong

Until now, he painted a lot in social realist art style. He painted people as they are, contrary to Mao Zedong's social realism where people were idealized.



Luo Zhongli

A piece he made, titled "*Father*", was controversial at its time. The painting was done in 1980, when China was still in the early stages of opening up. It was 2.8m x 1.78m big, which was usually a size only reserved for state leaders. Moreover, it depicted a person who looked like he was going through a difficult time, which invited criticisms that Luo did not respect the idea of progression. Eventually Luo put a pen behind the ears in the painting to represent economic advancement.



In Summary

China has a lot of artistic potential as it possessed a diverse pool of culture and traditions. However, those weren't fully explored due to numerous troubles the country had experienced in the past century. Only after China opened up to international relations, which is around the 1980s, that China could fully spread their unique culture to the rest of the world beyond Asia.

Some Chinese contemporary art is based on Western-style artworks, infused with Chinese characteristics - expressionist, organic, involves calligraphy. Some artists portray the situation in China during the turmoil, sometimes using social realist art style.

JAPAN:

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Japan is widely known for many of its contemporary designs and has greatly left its mark on the design scene globally. Upon the mentioning of Japan, many will think of manga, anime and its simple yet of high quality designs. However, before understanding how Japan had gotten to where it is today, we must first take a look at its history and how it has shaped Japan's design scene and art style today.

Early 1900s-1920s:

During this period, Japan was focused on nationalism; it had just come out of the Meiji Restoration period (1868) where there was a restoration of the Meiji Emperor. The Meiji period ended in 1912 and that shortly followed the Taisho period (1912-1926) and then the Showa period (1926-1989). We see here the many changes and transitions that Japan had to go through within just the short period of 20 years. The constant changes in the political, economic and social environment affected the art movements in Japan. Firstly, the Meiji period saw the start of western influences as Japan did its best to learn from the west and adapt their culture. Moving onto the Taisho period, we see an increase of the political scene where art was liberal and used to express thoughts, opinions, ideas and controversies. This was a huge change from the Meiji period, where art was more conservative. This was a start to a new form of art in Japan.

Before the end of World War II: 1930s-1940s:

During this period, we see the start of the Showa period (1926-1989) as mentioned above. This period saw the start of a militaristic mood; Western powers were shifting their focus from Asia to Europe after the happening of World War I (1914-1918) and this saw Japan rising up to be the next dominating world power around Asia. Art hence developed to promote messages encouraging the war and collaborating with the wartime government. With one view, will come another conflicting other and there were artists who disapproved war as well. This especially arose when Japan lost World War II (1945). Art was hence varied; it could be encouraging yet discouraging but nevertheless, it was all centered around the subject of war.

Example:



The Heavy Hand (1949)

End of World War II

After Japan lost the war and was defeated by the Western powers, there was a need for rebuilding of the country. As Japan had been so focused on the war for a period of time, most of its resources were focused on military might (on weapons like tanks and guns). It now had to channel its resources to economic means. This was difficult at first, especially since Japan had only limited exposure to the outside world. For instance, the Edo Period (1639-1858) that was shortly before the Meiji Period, saw Japan as having only one active international port. It always depended and could depend on its domestic market prior to its post-occupation. Many in Japan also only spoke Japanese instead of English, a language which many of the businessmen in Western markets spoke. This created a natural language barrier, making it even harder for Japan to go into internationalism. However, that was exactly what Japan needed to ensure revenue for its survival after post-war. Hence, this spurred the need for research and development to increase innovation so that Japan would be able to produce products that were attractive to the world market.

Quality control

With internationalization and the move towards more export competitive goods, there was a need for quality control to make products more appealing. This would increase market shares of companies in Japan, allowing for more profit and revenue to be earned, thereby increasing GDP of Japan. Although this would cost more initially, it was for a better investment in the long run. This actually did rapidly increase Japan's quality of products and became what they are widely known for to date. However, there was a problem. Before post-war period, Japanese companies had a lack of effective management skills and hence had to learn from overseas how to control management. They followed the United States and embarked on the Statistical Quality Control (SQC) Programme that the US had come up with. This initiative spread across the Japanese industry and many Japanese firms even began to set up their own quality control programmes.

Japanese Contemporary Design

1. Modern and Minimalist

The modern and minimalist aesthetic is widely known and associated with Japan. The idea of this design is that less is more. As the name suggests: minimal. This design style takes its influence from zen-style design, where the style removes any unnecessary decoration. It also observes nature and takes its aesthetic quality from nature. Beauty comes out from having less instead of elaborate pattern designs. A lot of creativity is needed as every line, stroke or element placed has to have a meaning and a reason. Every element incorporated in a minimalist design style has boundless potential to make or break a design. This “less is more” style also emerged to help save space, particularly in interior or furniture design as Japan houses do tend to be quite small. Space hence needs to be maximised in order to create comfort in a Japanese home. However, this “less is more” concept has become so appealing that many will adopt minimalist furniture into their home because it is eye pleasing, aesthetic and simply beautiful.

Examples:



An example of minimalist would be Muji’s toothbrush stand (on left). Muji is a well-known and well-loved brand that clearly embodies the Japan modern and minimalist aesthetic. Seen from the toothbrush stand, Muji has successfully eliminated unnecessary mass and other decorations a normal toothbrush stand will have. Instead, it is small and simple yet works perfectly well.

Another example would be the Butterfly Stool by Japanese designer Sori Yanagi (on right). This stool is made only with two identical pieces of plywood and yet is shaped with subtle yet beautiful curves that are only connected with one metal bolt. The soft curves used has made the stool to form a shape that looks like the chinese character “天”, which means sky or heaven in Chinese or the “torii” of Japanese shrines.

2. Japanese Pop Art + Manga and Anime

These 3 elements mentioned above are all linked together. Firstly to talk about Japanese pop art, it derived from pop art culture, as its name suggested. Pop art was first popular in America and Britain before its influence had spread to Japan. Japan’s pop art came from

their own avant-garde scene, seeing its first developments from the 1920s and 1930s, when nationalism of Japan was at its peak. Japanese pop art also has influences and had influenced the Superflat postmodern movement. The Superflat movement stems from an aesthetics defined by bold outlines, flat colouring and a lack of three-dimensionality. This is seen in Manga and Anime, another art movement that has heavily impacted Japan.

Manga and Anime are a style of comics that came from the 19th century and hand drawn computerised animation respectively. They focus on storytelling through the combination of graphic art, characterization and cinematography. They allow for the expounding on imagination. Manga and anime are also styles that are instantly recognisable, getting its influence from pop-art. For instance, both manga and anime incorporate the idea of exaggeration, by enlarging the eyes of its characters and having them of different colours (neon blue, pink, green and so on).



3. Kawaii

A Japan aesthetic that is also linked to the avant-garde scene. Kawaii means cuteness and refers to being charming, shy and girly.



It is associated with the shojo culture that is targeted at a female demographic (also manga and anime related). Kawaii has surprisingly had its cultural dominance and it is in fact Japan's plan to make its aesthetical mark globally. It is associated as well with coolness and youth, giving powers to this aesthetic (especially on a power tool called social media). The government has hence embraced this aesthetic and has slowly worked towards changing Japan's old perception of honour and samurai to one of Kawaii. This is seen when Japanese postal service started giving out postal stamps with a cute cartoon ambassador, Hello Kitty on them.



In Summary

Japan's design culture has been built on the foundation of its rich history. It has evolved from being nationalistic focused to going through rapid transformation for internationalization to its contemporary designs we see today. Japan's design has been changing to suit its culture but we can safely say that it has been for the better. No matter what contemporary design aspect, we see that Japan has made its mark worldwide and its design is instantly recognisable due to its unique traits.

SOUTHEAST ASIA:

Southeast Asia (SEA) is typically divided into two parts, namely Mainland SEA and Maritime SEA. The term 'mainland' refers mostly to nations which are part of the Eurasia landmass, such as Thailand and Myanmar. On the other hand, maritime SEA usually refers to nations which are effectively islands separate from the mainland (think Indonesia or the Philippines).

While the concept of sovereignty was not particularly prevalent, for simplicity, I will be using the modern definitions of each nation's boundaries.

Antiquity to Pre-1950s

Historically, Southeast Asia was host to various unique indigenous people and natural resources. The indigenous Austronesians, for example, had distinctive cultural customs and art forms, like body tattoos and ceramics. Batik was also a widespread handicraft in Java, simply because it was rich in the materials required for wax-resist dyeing (beeswax, cotton, plant dyes).

An example of Javanese batik. This is a more **modern style** of batik, featuring more vibrant colours (classical batik tends towards earth tones like brown).



[Source](#)

While batik predominantly features **native plant and flower patterns**, batik has been known to incorporate subjects from various other countries due to **foreign influences**. For example, hokokai batik was prevalent in Indonesia during the Japanese Occupation, and featured Japanese motifs like butterflies and cherry blossoms.

An example of Filipino body tattoo. The craft is nearly extinct, as practitioners and potential successors are rare.



[Source](#)

These tattoos are characteristic of the **indigenous Austronesian tribes**, and have various meanings as 1) proofs of valour, 2) symbols of spiritual protection, and 3) a visual design to look intimidating to enemies. The latter was so successful that the fleeing Spanish came to dub the Filipino tribes as the 'Painted Ones' (mistakenly believing the tattoos were paint).

Southeast Asia was also plagued by foreign interest. Maritime Southeast Asia diverges from the mainland at this point, where they were more likely to receive influences from seafaring traders and missionaries. The clearest indication is the emergence of foreign religions like Islam and Buddhism, and it is often alleged that traditional crafts such as wayang are derived from South Asian practices. The maritime nations were even considered part of Greater India.



[Source](#)

An example of a wayang figure. Wayang is the name given to a style of Southeast Asian puppet theatre.

Though there is no consensus on the origins of wayang, it is often thought that wayang was based off South Asian puppet arts, especially where maritime SEA was very susceptible to **Indian influence**. Wayang was also later associated with **Islam**: while images were forbidden in said religion, shadows were technically acceptable.

There are a few subsets of wayang, differentiated by the material and construction of the figures. This particular image shows a wayang kulit figure, identifiable by that it is made of leather, and that it is 2-dimensional.

The mainland tended to receive more Chinese influences, where the closer they were, the more likely they would be to be colonised. A traditional example would be the Vietnamese Ao Dai, which is similar to the Chinese Hanfu; a modern example would be the presence of communism in Laos.

An example of the Vietnamese ao dai (right), and the Chinese cheongsam (left). As can be seen, both have mandarin collars, which is a **predominantly Chinese** fashion design trait.

Often, the material is also similar, where both ethnic garments tend to be made of silk; both also tend to feature a double-breasted design, where the flaps overlap.



[Source](#)



[Source](#)

Nowadays, both are body-fitting as well.

Later, European influences would come to affect Southeast Asia, where every single nation (sans Thailand) was colonised. As aptly put, there was a “transfer of technologies, techniques, and systems to the colonies” (Huppatz, 2018). This would later be reflected in the paths to modernity taken, where Southeast Asia headed towards European systems and styles, though still unconsciously letting their Asian sensibilities tweak their progression slightly.

1950s: Emphasis on nation building and development than visual design

Previously, all SEA countries (sans Thailand) were under colonial rule, due to their desirability as significant ports on the trade route and their richness in natural resources. By the mid-1900s, however, most Southeast Asian countries gained their independence. Various events happen in various countries, such as Marcos’ autocracy in the Philippines and the 2nd Indochina War in Vietnam. Regardless, it can be generally agreed that most SEA countries focused on nation building and development in this time.

Design thus took a back seat, where most nations were focused on things like economic development and sustainability, as well as urbanisation and modernisation. Certainly, visual design existed, but mostly in a function-serving form, such as advertisements for products.



Picture by yours truly. National Library Singapore. (2018 July 20 - 2019 February 24). Selling Dreams: Early Advertising in Singapore. Singapore.

An example of early Singaporean advertising. The very co-existence of English and Chinese provides a huge visual clue as to the Singaporean demographic, featuring mostly English speakers and ethnic Chinese.

The contours of the tiger suggest **European influences**, where realistic highlights and shadows were not traditionally featured in Asian art. The tiger in itself has the implication of showing the **Asian influence**, where tigers are mostly revered in places like China, Malaysia and India. Most of the text is in a highly readable font, what with block letters and a thick outline, which is a fairly **modern** typographic style as well.

Another interesting but irrelevant point is the beauty of this advertisement from a graphic design perspective, from the dynamism of the tiger to the text hierarchy and colour harmony.

Two examples of designs from Southeast Asian graphic design companies. They were founded in 2011 and 2001 respectively.

From the book, directly,

Driv Loo of Little Ideas Everyday stated that “design history in Malaysia is still **very young**”, and thus they are still taking inspiration from **overseas**.

The founder of YouWorkForThem noted that Thai graphic design is “still **not too unique** and... seems to copy many of the **Western design styles**”.

(Technically, design in terms of political, economic and societal designing occurred, but for simplicity’s sake, we will define design strictly in terms of visual design only.)

2000s: Growth of visual design

By the 2000s, most countries were still developing, though already host to highly developed cities amidst their underdeveloped villages. While modernisation was not rejected, there was a tendency to either 1) attempt to rectify the erosion of traditional arts and crafts, or 2) unconsciously weave Southeast Asian styles and techniques into international trends.

Done by: En Cui, Samantha, Vania, Joey (Chan Ker En)



Picture by yours truly. Winder, J. & Hector, I. (2013). Little Ideas Everyday. In Where You Going? Design Adventures in Southeast Asia (pp. 44-5). SG: Basheer Graphic Books.



Picture by yours truly. Winder, J. & Hector, I. (2013). YouWorkForThem. In Where You Going? Design Adventures in Southeast Asia (pp. 90-1). SG: Basheer Graphic Books.

An example of an **active attempt to restore traditional heritage**. This is a Loro Piana jacket made from lotus silk, with an estimated worth of US\$5,600.

Samatoa, the fabric supplier, taps on the **natural resources** of Cambodia by experimenting with fabrics made from local plants like banana and kapok. They are also actively involved in maintaining the **ancient tradition** of silk weaving in Cambodia.

Interestingly, there is also a tinge of **religion** involved, most clearly evidenced by their key image being the lotus, a reference to Buddhism. The religion also guides their work ethics, in attempting to create an environmentally and socially friendly business.

An example of an **amalgamation of traditional techniques and modern sensibilities**. This is an Atelier 2+ chair made of wood and rattan.

Clearly, this piece of furnishing is designed in a **modern style**, with a focus on simplicity and functionality than ornamentation or gaudiness. Unlike older caned chairs, there are no unnecessary elements, just pure geometry.

What may not be as clear is the presence of a **traditional weaving technique**: caning. This technique uses rattan **native to Southeast Asia** (which explains its uniqueness). What differentiates this chair from vintage European caned chairs (traders did bring the material back home for furniture makers to employ in their works), though, is definitely the modern twist mentioned above.

While it did not make it into the slides, it may be worth checking out postage stamps in Southeast Asia. Though not universally acclaimed, they tend to be fairly representative of what is culturally significant to each nation, and they are fairly fair indicators of the graphic design trends for each nation. (Special mention goes out to Singapore for showing off their technological prowess through holographic stamps.)

SINGAPORE:

Singapore is a country which lies within the transition range between maritime and mainland Southeast Asia. Alongside Malaysia, this has subjected Singapore to a fairly mixed blend of both South/West Asian and East Asian influences.

What truly sets Singapore apart from the rest, however, boils down to 1) the lack of natural resources, and 2) the lack of a homogenous population comprised of indigenous people. As



[Source](#)



[Source](#)

a result of the former, Singapore effectively has a culture of functional designs with certain objectives to meet. As a result of the latter, Singapore tends to lack a distinctive identity, and is very susceptible to design influences from overseas. At least compared to other Southeast Asian nations, however, there has been fairly strong governmental support. This has been crucial (and somewhat helpful) in building a design culture, at least for design that is justifiably useful.



An example of graphic design from H55 for The Sandwich Shop. Their designers hold the view that design is “only meaningful as an extension and mediator of its context” (i.e. design with an objective in mind).

Like many other works of this era, their works feature a modern approach to graphic design, aiming for concise clarity than excessive decoration. The digital, clean graphics also emphasise an international look that makes it functional anywhere, anytime.

[Source](#)



An example of graphic design from The Asylum for Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf. Their motto is “marrying art and commerce with the aim of excelling at both”, an allusion to their primary jobs as brand designers.

The font and image styles evoke what I would dub a “savannah” impression, where it is not unlike the advertisement of The Lion King musical. Such a touch gives it an impression of culture, though there is the question of if it is a Singaporean culture, or adopted from elsewhere.

[Source](#)



An example of fashion design from Aijek as worn by Natalie Zea. Danelle decided to aim for aesthetically pleasing yet convenient feminine wear which catered to everyone.

Consequently, the clothes designed by Aijek tends towards a universal look as well, such that it can work well in any context with any woman. The fact that all the models are not Asian makes it easy to mistake this brand for any other European brand out there.

[Source](#)



An example of fashion design from Depression as worn at the Berlin Fashion Week. The founders drew inspiration from Japanese street fashion, with an emphasis on the ability to wear it casually while looking edgy.

Again, it is dubious as to how much the brand has deviated from a Singapore culture and context. In a way, it is proving that Singapore is all about adopting and re-appropriating from other cultures.

[Source](#)

All four of these tend towards lacking a distinctive identity. In fact, it is a conscious effort, so as to appeal to wider audiences. The following examples have a much more Singaporean vibe to them, where it is almost inconceivable that they would have come from any other

country.

An example of porcelain design from the Spotted Nyonya collection by Hans Tan. Said culture is a mix of Malay and Chinese special only to Southeast Asia.

There are two major points, namely 1) the Peranakan influence of gaudy images, and 2) the polka dots, which gives it a fresh, modern twist.



[Source](#)

An example of brand design from NEWater by the government. They branded their toilet water to solve the problem of public disgust towards recycled water.

It is shockingly effective, with various interesting design points, from the unique bottle texture and shape, to the clean-cut typography and decent mascot.



[Source](#)

An example of architectural design at Bras Basah MRT by WOHA. Their work is defined by context sensitivity.

Most prominent would be their awareness of urbanisation as a factor for pollution, and thus their environmentally friendly designs. Glass and greenery are also key features, in tackling the context of a tropical climate.



[Source](#)

Another example of architectural design at where we are right now by CPG Consultants.

It is ultimately built in a similar fashion as most of WOHA's works (glass, grass, good tech). Nevertheless, it is still well-known for its distinctive form, and the sunken plaza is an unusual addition.



[Source](#)

Things which did not make it into the slides, but are nevertheless interesting, internationally known and new works in the Singaporean design scene:

- Athena Collection
 - by Olivia Lee, named "most promising" at an international fair in Milan
 - An example of modern and internationalistic design in Singapore
- Gardens by the Bay
 - Has received many, many awards
 - An example of environmentally conscious design, as well as the prevalence of functional design (in this case, to attract tourism) in Singapore
- Examples of sponsors within design industry
 - Singaporean jewellery designer apprentices sought by Italian jeweller, Danilo Giovanni, who wishes to promote Singaporean jewellery
 - Pathlight dinosaur pouch, which was presented by Ho Ching at the White

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- House and thus came to have international recognition
- LucasFilm Singapore, which actively hires Singaporean designers

Conclusion

Again, I reiterate that contemporary Southeast Asia is truly still too young to have a clear vision. However, I have confidence that it can develop into something truly unique, as we (mostly) have what is needed: a unique local heritage and sufficient foreign influence, which, together, makes it possible to create interesting content.

CONCLUSION:

To conclude, it is safe to say that many Asian countries have overlapping causes and effects that is taken into account, such as

- Globalization,
- Colonialism,
- Nationalism,
- Traditionalism, and
- Religion and Philosophy

They often share common design features and objectives as a result, from the minimal simplicity of modern aesthetics to the appreciation of everyday life and religious symbolism.

A well-known architectural term which may encompass these points is Critical Regionalism, which is essentially how Asians make use of their culture and environment to initiate progress.

Critical Regionalism is an approach which combines both the modern and traditional. While it accepts the progressiveness of international styles, it attempts to resolve the lack of distinctive identity in modernism. This is done through the use of regional flavour, thus creating an amalgamation of the international and local, the modern and traditional. Additionally, it rejects flamboyance and ornamentation (such as in Postmodernism), instead favouring the simple and functional.

(A famous example of critical regionalism is WOHA's architecture, which tends to cater to the local context. You can see more details under Singapore.)

Where Asia is a region heavily influenced by Europe, there is often an influx of mimicry. However, that is not to say that Asians do not have their own unique art style: For the most part, we do have our own distinctive styles, and these styles are not necessarily outdated just because they have ancient roots. In fact, these styles will combine with Western design principles to create a new form altogether.

Regardless, it could even be asserted that this is a universal phenomenon. As aptly summarised by Huppatz, we have to bear in mind that:

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1) Design is not driven by one person or group, and is instead driven by larger societies and communities. Consequently, it is inevitable that we will see overall trends in certain directions, even if people have their individual design quirks.

2) All of humanity is interconnected. Different styles from different cultures will have similarities and differences, and will have drawn inspiration from each other at any given point in time simply because it is impossible that any culture developed in complete isolation.

To end off, here is a quote which aptly summarises everything. “Essentially, Asian design is a hybrid of modern and traditional, moving beyond the notion of European design as a central focus of design history.” (Huppatz, 2018)

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